

OLA IFC Tuesday Topics May 2021: The Impact of Police Presence on Intellectual Freedom

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC Committee.



The Impact of Police Presence on Intellectual Freedom

When we train new hires at my library, safety is one of the first things that we discuss. And when our trainees ask me what situations warrant a 911 call, my advice to them is this:

*Emergency services are for emergencies—immediate threats to someone's health and safety. If you're in a situation where you're wondering whether you **should** dial 911, then there's probably something else you can do before you make the choice to pick up the phone.*

There are many reasons that we give this advice to new hires, emphasize fair rule enforcement and deescalation tactics, and [invest in trainings](#) that prompt staff to critically consider the impact of law enforcement interactions on their visitors. While we recognize that we still have more work to do on this front, our choice to foster and promote this culture does not just stem from a point of compassion; it also stems from a desire to protect the intellectual freedom rights of everyone we serve. This includes Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and persons experiencing homelessness—communities which have historically been targeted by police.

In a 2020 [American Libraries article](#), Cass Balzer reported on librarians who are active in the [Library Freedom Project](#) (LFP) and are taking steps to divest from a heavy law enforcement presence on their campuses. This article and others posit that the principles of Intellectual Freedom and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion can--and should--go hand in hand. As LFP director Alison Macrina pointed out, "If you are a person who is targeted by police, and you're in a library when police come in, you're going to change your behavior. You're going to self-censor."

These acts of "self-censorship" can manifest themselves in a variety of ways. It could prompt a person to abandon a book they were reading, move away from the stacks they were browsing, or log off a computer session early. It could also prompt someone to leave the library and its resources behind for the day—or even for good.

Each library's ability and approach to reducing unnecessary police presence in their buildings may look different, based on the bodies that govern them and the resources at their disposal. But there are universal questions that we can all ask ourselves as we seek to build environments that protect the intellectual freedom of everyone who visits the library:

1. Does the language of my library's behavior policy treat everyone fairly? And are those rules enforced consistently and compassionately?
2. Are staff members trained to recognize which situations warrant immediate emergency services intervention, and which do not?
3. Does my library *need* surveillance technology, such as CCTV? If the answer is yes, how can we minimize its impact and write policies that safeguard the information it captures?
4. Is my library required to have armed, uniformed police or private security staff patrol the building? If so, why? What alternatives might exist to foster a safe environment and connect vulnerable people to resources they need?

Intellectual Freedom does not begin and end with the language in our collection development policies. It manifests in the environments we choose to foster as well.

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Works Cited

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- "Librarian's Guide to Homelessness." *Ryan Dowd*, 2021. <http://www.homelesslibrary.com/>.